

9 January 1987

First Group of the Contras Completes Florida Training

WASHINGTON, Jan. 8 — The first group of Nicaraguan rebel commanders trained in Florida by the United States military has returned to Central America and training of a second group has already begun, according to rebel and American officials.

At least 67 commanders from five guerrilla groups representing all fronts in the growing war were intensively trained for two months at a secret military site in Florida, according to several rebel officials. They said special emphasis was given to the need for a more unified guerrilla movement as well as to basic military skills.

American and rebel officials estimate that more than 300 commanders will be trained this year in the redoubled Administration effort to forge the rebels, known as contras, into a guerrilla army capable of challenging the Sandinistas inside Nicaragua. This comes as Administration and Congressional officials acknowledge that future American backing for the contras is in grave doubt.

"It's ironic, but five years of backing the contras has really come down to what we can do in the next five months," said an American official who helps oversee rebel operations.

Training Site Kept Secret

Although the training program has been publicly announced, American officials have treated it as a nearly covert operation. For the first graduation ceremony last month, rebel officials said they were taken to the training site in vehicles with blacked-out windows in an effort to keep its precise location a secret.

The training effort is the first attempt to bring all the disparate rebel military groups together under the banner of the American-backed United Nicaraguan Opposition umbrella organization, American officials say.

This emphasis almost immediately offended some of the older, more politically conservative commanders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force rebel army based in Honduras, according to several rebel officials. Rebel leaders have long been divided over the control and political direction of the guerrilla army.

'Brainwashing' Is Charged

Several rebel officials, as well as a recent visitor to rebel camps in Honduras, said older rebel commanders there had angrily complained that American trainers were "brainwashing" rebel students and trying to turn them against the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, which has long been dominated by former members of the deposed Nicaraguan National Guard army.

By JAMES LEMOYNE

Special to The New York Times

But the call for greater unity and less factional infighting is backed by Administration officials and is unlikely to be dropped from the training, according to both rebel and American officials. The Nicaraguan Democratic Force has reacted by attempting to reinforce its control in rebel camps in Honduras, American and rebel officials say.

Although most of the rebel commanders in Florida were from the numerically dominant Nicaraguan Democratic Force, there were also about 20 "students" representing Miskito Indians belonging to the Misurata and Kisan rebel groups, as well as commanders from two other rebel units based in southern Nicaragua near the Costa Rican border, according to rebel officials.

The mixed group reflects not only the demand for unity, but also a new effort to step up military activity on the Atlantic coast and in southern Nicaragua, where the Miskito Indians, the Southern Opposition Bloc and rebels who belonged to the former Democratic Revolutionary Alliance still fight with probably fewer than 2,000 men.

Rebel officials say the training covered four main areas: paramedical help, explosives, military leadership and instruction on how to train new recruits in Central America.

Paramedical training has been included because rebel units operate for months deep inside Nicaragua where they have no medical facilities, American officials say. Hundreds of rebel fighters have died of wounds on long marches back to base camps in Honduras over the last four years of fighting, rebel officials say.

C.I.A. Advisers in Camps

Guerrilla leaders said American trainers in Honduras were also giving specialized instruction in long-range guerrilla patrol techniques to selected rebel commanders. Honduran officials previously denied that any training would take place in Honduras.

In addition, Central Intelligence Agency advisers are now working full-time in rebel camps, overseeing training, communications and logistics, according to rebel and American officials. Weapons and supplies provided by the United States have begun to pour into Honduras, paid for by the first installment of a \$100 million package of aid to the rebels approved by Congress last year.

Adolfo Calero, the political head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, may move to Honduras from his present home in Miami to more closely oversee rebel activities there, American officials say.

Rebel and American officials added that the Administration had purposely exaggerated the number of armed guerrillas in Nicaragua and Honduras. They said that rather than 18,000 to 20,000 combatants, the combined rebel forces probably number 12,000 men at most — a force still sizable enough to wreak havoc in a guerrilla war.

A new rebel human rights office has begun work in guerrillas camps in Honduras and a new rebel radio station, called Radio Liberation, has begun broadcasting into Nicaragua. In addition, rebel political leaders have stepped up contacts with the Nicaraguan exile community in the United States and Central America.